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The Captive Audience

By Doris Fleeson

Washington.

President Eisenhower twice endorsed Vice President Richard Nixon as his successor at the Gridiron Club dinner Saturday night.

The President had not before precisely withheld such endorsement, but he had seemed on other occasions to qualify or to confuse it with his unique press style. Before the star-spangled audience drawn from the communications, business and government worlds, he spoke up clearly if colloquially.

The President sat on the right of the club president, John C. O'Brien of the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Vice President was on O'Brien's left.

It would, said the President, save a lot of trouble and commotion if everybody at his table would just move two places for the future.

The club dinner made other political news by presenting Sen. Stuart Symington as the Democratic speaker in that Presidential candidate's most effective Washington appearance. Symington achieved a real tour de force; he was as effective in a lighter vein as in a sober appeal to reason, and he did it all in 12 minutes.

The Republican spokesman, Sen. Everett Dirksen, was at a disadvantage. He was called upon at short notice to substitute for Gov. Mark Hatfield of Oregon and so was in that trap described by George Ade in his famous apology: "Pardon the long letter; I didn't have time to write a short one." Dirksen talked too long, and his material, to put it kindly, was not fresh.

Symington worked with two accomplished wits—Clark Clifford and Charles Brown—on the lighter side of his remarks. He alone decided to make the dinner a vehicle for expressing his deepest conviction, which is that the United States

faces a clear and imminent threat to its survival.

The audience was not quite prepared for this face-to-face challenge to the President. They had been laughing with the Senator at a whole series of sharp thrusts, such as:

"I realize that all candidates for President need a good speech writer. I have secured a genius: the author of the *Big Boy* manifesto."

"My friend, Jack Kennedy, complains that Lyndon Johnson and I are not running in the primaries. He is mistaken; we are running Hubert Humphrey as hard as we can."

"My plan for the election campaign is to stage a new kind of Lincoln-Douglas debate—the old Nixon versus the new Nixon. The problem is how to keep that dog off the screen."

Symington paused for a moment, then began with great earnestness and no belligerence to explain his credo that this country must outperform the Kremlin or pay the price. He said that he was afraid that the American people did not realize that the absence of a shooting war was not peace.

Those serving in public life, he continued, have an obligation to enlighten them. He said that he did not claim greater competence or loyalty than any other American, but since he saw danger ahead he would continue to try to persuade Americans to make a greater effort to overcome the lead achieved by the Soviet Union.

It is not always possible to capture the attention of a gay dinner for sober discourse. The Gridiron audience listened.

The Senator left them with a smile. He claimed to know a Washington hostess who said to Dirksen, "Senator, I have heard a lot about you," and got this reply: "Maybe so, but you can't prove it."